DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 770 CG 017 939

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TITLE Women Prisoners: Reintegration into Family and Community.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); Coping; *Correctional Rehabilitation; Family Role; *Females; Group Therapy; *Interpersonal Competence; *Prisoners

ABSTRACT

Little research exists that addresses the issue of rehabilitation of women prisoners. To examine the effectiveness of a group psychotherapy program in assisting women prisoners to make the transition to the community and their families, 16 institutionalized women participated in a workshop. The program involved both individual and group participation, and concentrated on developing socially appropriate coping skills, learning about community resources, and developing a perspective on family and community roles. The women completed pre- and post-test measures of coping skills. Outcome data indicated that these prisoners understood the efficacy of moving away from self-centered, self-relient activities which harmed their coping; they also decreased the frequency of avoidant behaviors which they used to immediately reduce tension. Participants began to delay gratification and consider the use of social supports to develop more effective coping skills. In follow-up inquiries 18 months after the training, these women had a recidivism rate of 9 percent, a drop of one-third compared to the overall prison population. These findings suggest that families of returning women prisoners and the prisoners themselves might be psychosocially strengthened with therapeutic and educational training. (Author/JAC)

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# Women Prisoners:

# Reintegration Into Family and Community

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Presented at 91st Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Anaheim, CA, August 1983.

CG 017939

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Abstract

Group psychotherapy was used to facilitate the social coping skills of women who were scheduled to be released from prison. Psychosocial rehabilitation strategies were utilized in the transition from prison back into families and commmunities. Issues addressed included developing socially appropriate coping skills, learning about community resources, and developing a perspective of family and community roles. Pre- and post-test measurements were taken of copin skills. Perceptions of self and others, and sources of family stress were identified. The goal of therapy was to strength the ability of women prisoners and to use the resources of their families and communities. Outcome data indicated that these prisoners understood the efficacy of moving away from self-centered, self-reliant activities which were harmful in their coping as well as decreasing the frequency of the avoidant behaviors which immediately reduced tension. Participants began to delay gratification and consider the use of social supports to develop more efficacious coping skills. In follow-up inquiries 18 months after the training, the women had a recidivism rate of 9%. This is a drop of one-third compared to the overall prison population. It is recommended that families of returning women prisoners and the prisoners might be psychosocially strengthened with therapeutic and educational training.

Women Prisoners:

Reintegration Into Family and Community

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Little research exists that addresses the issue of rehabilitation of women prisoners. A program was developed to assist women who were soon to be released from prison in making the transition from the prison back into their families and communities. The workshop was one of a series of didactic and experiential training sessions to prepare women prisoners for re-entry into society. The women with whom we worked were receiving vocational training, but found it extremely difficult to obtain and/or maintain gainful employment, following previous releases from the prison. As a result, the issues addressed included developing socially appropriate coping skills, learning about community resources, and developing a perspective of their roles within their families and communities. The focus on family was used because these women were victims of the societal expectation that women have multiple roles with the primary roles being wife and mother. Their inability to

successfully juggle their multiple roles had led to repeated incarceration for several of the women as they tended to act out in an antisocial manner when they were frustrated. The goal of the workshop was to assist these women in finding supports that would ease the burden of their multiple roles. Pre- and post-test measurements were taken of coping skills. Perceptions of self and others, and sources of family stress were also evaluated.

## Subjects

Empirical data on women in a midwestern correctional institution were collected during a workshop in which family-related issues and community sources of stress in family systems were identified by women prisoners ( $N$ =16). The participants covered an age range from late teenaged to middle-aged, and included Black, American Indian, and white women.

## Methods

The workshop included a variety of exercises which involved both individual and group participation. As a pretest, each of the women was given a list of coping behaviors (adapted from (McCubbin, Boss, Wilson, and Lester, in press). They were asked to indicate

those coping skills which they found useful. The women then discussed how the skills were helpful and shared other skills which they used successfully.

After the discussion of coping skills, the women discussed the issues of Interpersonal Influence, Values, Caring, Work Relations, Rejection and Alientation, Needs and Wants, and Interpersonal Competence (Johnson, 1972).There was a focus in those exercises on the ways the women felt others perceived them.

The women were then asked to complete a set of incomplete sentences and to share their responses. The sentences were written to shift focus in two directions: (a) from external perspectives to internal perceptions, and (b) from general relationships to the specific relationships with family, community, and self.

Once the focus on family had been firmly established, the issue of normal family development was addressed. The women were asked to indicate the family life events and changes which had occurred in their families during their incarcerations (adapted from McCubbin and Patterson, 1981).The goal was to point out that the families to which the women would return would be different from the families from which they had originally been separated, due, in large part, to normal maturation. There was group discussion as the prisoners shared insights.

The final segment of the workshop involved a didactic session

on community resources and rights to public services. This included distribution of and discussion about specific services in the state with names, addresses, and telephone numbers, and descriptions of agencies. Special attention was paid to those agencies which provided multiple services and referral services which could provide guidance around choosing appropriate services.

A post-test was then conducted by having the women endorse the coping skills which they felt would be most helpful to them (McCubbin, Boss, Wilson, and Lester, in press).

## Results

Each woman identified ways to reduce tensions, social supports, and aspects of self-reliance which would be helpful in the reintegration process into their families and communities. The pretest coping skills revealed tactics that reflected immediate ways to reduce tension, without regard to possible negative consequences, some self-reliance, and minimal use of available social supports. Their discussion revealed low self-esteem and a tendency to cope by depending on others' decisions and/or in a reactive, rather than responsive, manner to environmental stress. These women reduced tension by withdrawing, using behaviors such as crying or watching television.

Self-reliant, constructive activities were not used, but there was a focus instead on purely self-centered tasks, such as hobbies, dieting, and exercise. These women did not consider, for example, pursuing professional counselling or developing independence as useful tactics, but leaned toward activities which involved withdrawal and dependency.

In examining the social supports chosen by these women, it was noted that fewer than 50% indicated consideration of local programs or activities designed for people in similar situations, seeking out of new and understanding friends and/or more supportive relationships, or pursuit of local economic benefits for themselves or their families.

Personality measures and dimensions of coping suggested that the women experienced feelings of low self-worth, a sense of depending upon parents, spouses, boyfriends, and/or other authority adult figures. These women were generally unwilling to take responsibility for their destinies, rather tending to blame other people (such as the parole board or the prison staff) or institutions (e.g., the law or the state) for their lack of progress. Only two of the prisoners acknowledged that they were responsible for their present situations.

Interpersonally, the women indicated trust primarily in God (38%) and in themselves (31%). Twenty-five percent mentioned other

people, generally reflecting a lack of trust in others. Interestingly, though, in examining what these women liked about themselves, characteristics of good interpersonal skills were revealed, such as ability to understand others, feelings for other people, and ability to help others.

When perceptions of significant others were explored, only three of the prisoners described their fathers in specific positive terms (supportive, easy to talk to, or warm). In general, the responses were vague (great, nice) or concrete (dead, does not work, or a man). Similarly, responses about mothers were mixed. There were positive responses, such as understanding, fantastic, always there, and special, or negative responses, e.g., ignorant, blaming, or perfectionistic.

In examining these women's perceptions of home, there was little sense of belonging or connectedness with home as a place where the family existed in an atmosphere of love and support. Only two of the women described home as a place they missed and/or to which they wanted to return.

Family was described as a source of love and understanding by only five of the inmates. In discussion, it was noted that the ethnic minority women (Black and American Indian) described supportive relationships with their families with relatives who visited, corresponded, and/or provided child care, whereas the white

women tended to experience total rejection or increased strain in family relationships.

The women enumerated family life events and changes in their nuclear and extended families. During their incarcerations, the women were aware of a variety of family stresses, as illustrated in Table I. It is important to note that, as women, these prisoners were primary caretakers in their families and therefore responsible for handling family finances, yet only 25% initially considered pursuing local economic benefits available to them and none indicated awareness of any financial stresses or changes in work status of family members.

The post-test data revealed that the women had new social and community resources to turn to after release from prison but did not perceive ways in which their families could help them more. As noted in the results of the pretest of coping skills and the personality descriptions, these women were very dependent upon others and did not use self-reliant coping skills, yet they appeared to recognize that their familial dependence was also not particularly helpful to them. Figure 1 indicates that there was significant change in the perceived efficacies of the use of hobbies (less useful) and of keeping one's self in good shape (more useful), yet there was still avoidance of activities leading to the insecurity of independence. The women volunteered that other coping skills which they found

effective were reading, keeping a journal, listening to the radio, spending time with their children, going for walks, and isolating themselves. All of those activities involve a withdrawal from contact with other adults. In discussion, the prisoners were unable to state that they returned to stressful situations after periods of withdrawal to actively participate in contructive problem solving. They appeared to either withdraw completely or react inappropriately to stress. Overall, there was ambivalence in both the pre- and post-test measures of self-reliant coping skills with no significant general change in this area.

Figure 2 reveals, however, that there was a marked reduction in the perception of the usefulness of immediate tension-reducing activities. Specific activities which were no longer perceived as useful were crying and watching television. The change in perspective suggested that the women were considering alternatives which did not immediately reduce tension but would be more effective across time.

This was verified by the results shown in Figure 3, which reflects a significant increase in the perceived efficacy of social supports. Whereas fewer than 50% of the prisoners initially indicated any willingness to use local programs people in their situations, take advantage of local economic benefits, or develop new lifestyles with different friends and activities, there was a

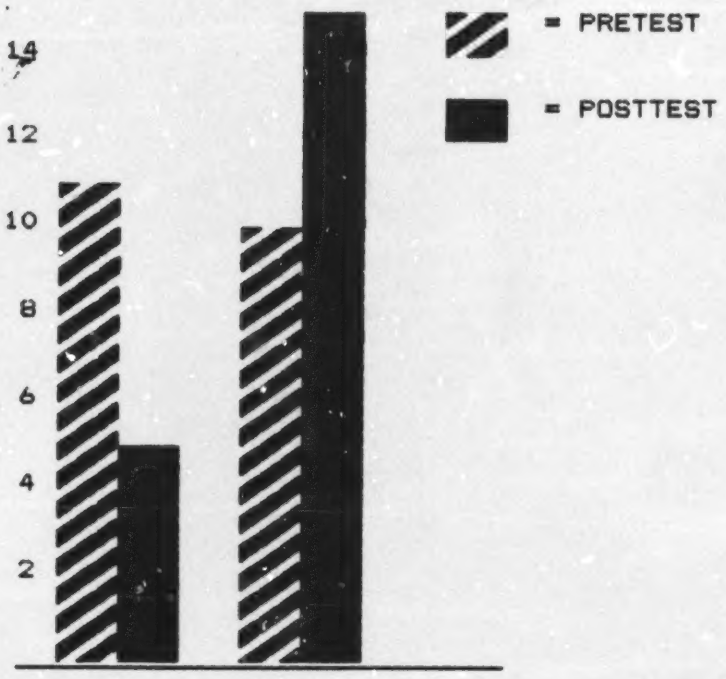
significant increase in the perceived usefulness of such activities. With involvement in socially supportive activities, there would be increased opportunities for these women to learn how to handle their multiple roles and constructively reduce stress in their environments. With the increased ability to manage their lives, would come increased self-esteem.

The goal of the workshop was to strengthen the ability of women prisoners to use the resources of their families and communities. Data indicate that the goal was reached as these women prisoners clearly understood the efficacy of moving away from self-centered self-reliant activities and immediate tension reducers toward coping skills involving delay of gratification and the use of social supports. It is suggested that families of returning women prisoners, as well as the prisoners themselves, might be strengthened with similar training and educational programs.

Table 1. Family stressors occurring during incarceration

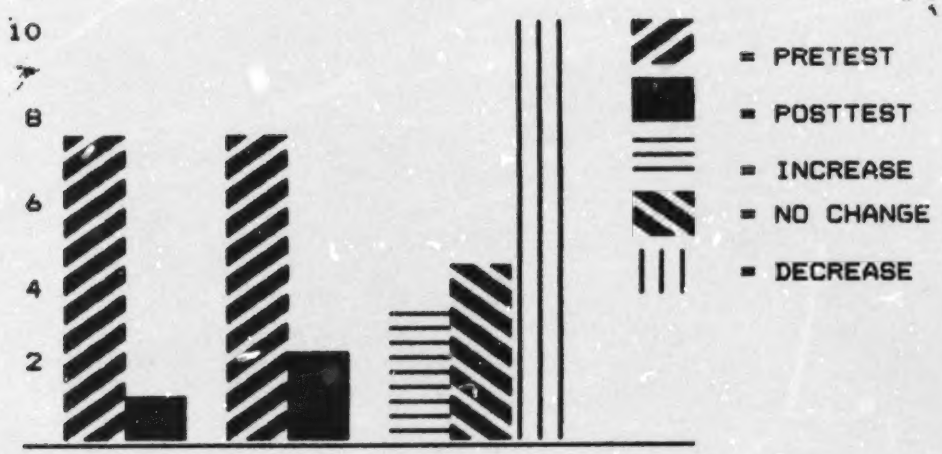
| Stressors: | N |
|---|---|
| Intrafamilial Stress | 14 |
| Marital stress | 8 |
| Illness | 11 |
| Deaths and/or losses of relationships | 15 |
| Transitions in or out of the family | 10 |
| Legal Violations | 2 |

Figure 1. Number of prisoners using self-reliance




| Hobby | Keep self in shape |
|---|---|
| $t_{(30)} = 1.81$ | $t_{(30)} = 1.85$ |
| $p < .05$ | $p < .05$ |

Figure 2. Number of prisoners using tension reduction




| Cry | Watch television | Overall |
|---|---|---|
| $t_{(30)} = 2.63$ | $t_{(30)} = 2.42$ | $t_{(15)} = 1.80$ |
| $p < .001$ | $p < .05$ | $p < .05$ |

Figure 3. Number of prisoners using social supports

| Local programs | Local benefits | New lifestyle | Overall |
|---|---|---|---|
| $t_{(30)} = 1.81$ | $t_{(30)} = 1.84$ | $t_{(30)} = 1.81$ | $t_{(15)} = 2.26$ |
| $p < .05$ | $p < .05$ | $p < .05$ | $p < .05$ |

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The data analysis for this study, the word processing, and the graphics were all done on a microcomputer.